Philomathes

Dysfunctional *Domus*: Morality and Familial Stability in Catullus' *Carmen* 64

Whether Catullus' epyllion on the marriage of Thetis and Peleus contains a morally conclusive subtext or is an elaborate expression of artistic escapism has been repeatedly debated in scholarly interpretations. Some see *Carmen* 64 as a subtle criticism of both the violence and dysfunction in the Heroic Age and the deteriorating moral climate in Rome in Catullus' day, while others reject the notion that Catullus had any sort of moral commentary in mind as he wrote.[1] Instead, as James Dee claims, the brutalities present in *Carmen* 64 are simply reflective of the violence common to the Heroic Age and most of its literature, so attempting to extract a moral conclusion from the poem is not consistent with the plausible intent of the author.[2] However, I intend to argue here that a full absence of moral undertones in Catullus' *Carmen* 64 is not possible. Even an escapist reading of the poem compels us to ask why the poem resorts to escapism in the first place. Even if Catullus did not write *Carmen* 64 as an outright criticism of the

[1] For the argument in favor of reading Catullus 64 with a moral subtext, see, e.g., J.C. Bramble, "Structure and Ambiguity in Catullus LXIV," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 16, no. 16 (1970): 22-41. For the opposing argument, see James Dee, "Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age: A Reply," *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol.7, no. 1 (1982): 98-109.

[2] See Dee, "Catullus 64 and the Heroic Age: A Reply." Dee argues that pulling out the extreme barbarity seen in the poem and concluding its purpose to be a criticism of the Heroic Age is a misguided conclusion, as it forgets that the heroes were agents of cruelty themselves, and that their cruelty had been thoroughly documented by the mythological tradition that precedes Catullus. For Dee, virtue and so-called "barbarity" are not mutually exclusive: it is quite possible for a hero to exercise both and not lose his heroic status, so pointing to an instance of barbarity and delegitimizing heroism is not an accurate reflection of the reality of the Heroic Age.

Heroic Age or of his current day, it is impossible to read the poem as totally divorced from moral connotations.

Dee has made a compelling argument against reading the poem as a critique of the Heroic Age, so I will not attempt to present an argument that Catullus does critique it, nor even that his poem is a targeted criticism of the moral devolution of his day - Catullus does not make any outright evaluations of the immorality in his poem. Instead, it is more reasonable to say that Catullus points to outward dysfunction throughout the poem that is itself rooted in immorality, but instead of providing an explicit criticism of that immorality, Catullus forces his reader to make his own moral conclusion. In other words, Catullus does not avoid a moral conclusion, as some say he does, nor does he explicitly state one. He merely points to the possibility of making such a conclusion while stopping just short of it so that the reader must do it for himself.

The moral dysfunction that permeates *Carmen* 64 is primarily familial in nature. In his narrative of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis and his digression into the story of Ariadne and Theseus, Catullus closely examines human relationships through their motivations, their outcomes, and their flaws. This observation of familial dysfunction as central to *Carmen* 64 has been frequently attested – Marion Leathers Daniels, for instance, writes that the concept of the *domus*, especially as discussed in the Song of the *Parcae*, is the central theme of *Carmen* 64.[3] In this essay, I will agree with the assertion of the *domus* as the main theme of the poem, but add nuance to the claim by arguing that the *domus*, as presented in *Carmen* 64

[3] See Marion Leathers Daniels, "'The Song of the Fates' in Catullus 64: Epithalamium or Dirge?" *The Classical Journal*, vol. 68, no. 2 (1972-3): 97-101.

through the primary examples of Ariadne, Theseus, and the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, is the vehicle by which Catullus presents the moral dysfunction, compelling the reader's consideration of moral interpretive conclusions. Catullus' poem is supposedly about an idealized wedding, but neither the wedding, nor the ecphrasis in the middle of the poem, present an ideal picture of marriage. When Catullus relates the stories of his two pairs of lovers, he often misremembers the narrative,[4] presenting either idealized versions of the stories that are not backed up by his predecessors, or versions heavily ironized through the emphasis on the supposedly ideal. This gives the reader a strong impression of dysfunction within the models of the *domus*. Further, Catullus often presents his characters in a state of familial liminality, not belonging to one particular *domus* unit, but rather stuck between two homes or entirely homeless, having rejected the *domus* altogether. This ambiguity adds weight to the reader's conception that the *domus* in *Carmen* 64 is highly flawed. Thus, Catullus' use of narrative forgetfulness, irony, and familial liminality to describe the concept of the *domus* is the primary mechanism by which Catullus confronts his reader with the reality of societal dysfunction that results from a lack of morality.

Catullus' forgetful nature presents itself early in the poem. In lines 19-21, Catullus describes Thetis' and Peleus' infatuation with each other and Jupiter's mirroring approval of their union:

[4] See esp. *Carmen* 64.19-21, to be discussed below. The portrayal of a willing Thetis 'misremembers' her reluctance as narrated by Homer in *Iliad* 18.434.

> *Tum Thetidis Peleus* ***incensus*** *fertur* ***amore***
> *Tum Thetis humanos* ***non despexit*** *hymenaeos*
> *Tum Thetidi* ***pater ipse iugandum*** *Pelea* ***sensit****.*[5]
>
> Then for Thetis Peleus was inflamed, they say, with love,
> Then Thetis did not look down on human nuptials,
> Then to Thetis, the father himself felt, Peleus must be joined.[6]

These lines elegantly describe a mutual love between mortal man and divine woman, with the paternal approval of Jupiter, king of the gods. This story seems to be the beginning of an ideal wedding – except it is the wrong story. According to the prevailing accounts of Peleus and Thetis' marriage, Thetis did not want to marry Peleus, a mortal, nor did Jupiter originally condone the marriage to Peleus. Instead, Jupiter himself wanted to marry Thetis, and only supported the union to Peleus out of fear that his own union with Thetis would produce a son more powerful than himself. Jupiter initially wanted his role to be *coniunx*, not *pater,* as he appears in *Carmen* 64's opening. This recognizably altered beginning of the Peleus and Thetis story, coupled with Jupiter's unexpected switch in roles, immediately alerts the reader of present dysfunction by bringing the previous story to mind – a story racked with moral compromise in the coercion of the unwilling Thetis into marriage with Peleus. Catullus' misremembering is a way of pointing right at the dysfunction, as the reluctant Thetis and frustrated Jupiter that are familiar to the reader are portrayed instead as eager for this union between god and man. This misremembering of the familiar Thetis and Jupiter flags a suspicion that perhaps Catullus' poem is not actually about an ideal wedding, but rather is headed in a different direction.

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[5] Bolded emphases are my own.
[6] All translations of the Latin are my own.

Although Catullus begins the poem with forgetfulness surrounding the first meeting of Peleus and Thetis and the attitude of Jupiter toward the wedding, later in the poem he course-corrects, presenting the prevailing and familiar version of the myth. In lines 26-28, Catullus asks Peleus,

> *Thessaliae columen, Peleu, cui* ***Iuppiter ipse****,*
> *Ipse suos divum* ***genitor concessit amores***
> *Tene Thetis tenuit pulcherrima Nereine?*
>
> Zenith of Thessaly, Peleus, to whom Jupiter himself,
> The begetter of the gods himself, gave up his love.
> Did Thetis, most beautiful of Nereids, embrace you?

Now, unlike before, Jupiter is present in the poem in the form in which others remember him – the reluctant *genitor* conceding *suos amores* to a human husband. He is not the proud, willing father-figure, eagerly matching Thetis with Peleus, but rather a direct competitor of Peleus who is forced to relinquish his prize out of anxiety for his own longevity. This version of the story, although accurate to the prevailing tradition, explicitly undermines the poem's supposed theme and initial presentation. Whereas in lines 19-21, Catullus compels the reader to remember Thetis and Jupiter's dysfunction by telling a poorly remembered story, here Catullus does not rely on the memory of the reader, but instead overtly references the breakdown of Jupiter's *domus* caused by his simultaneous role as *pater* of the gods and desire to be *coniunx* of Thetis. Even though the divine realm does not adhere strictly to the confines of human *domus*, the images of familial breakdown revealed through this mythological story still provoke thoughts of morality as it relates to the human *domus*.

Moving on from the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, Catullus' ecphrasis depicts the character who most fully

embodies faulty memory in the poem. Theseus, the would-be lover and husband of Ariadne, is notoriously forgetful – his most common epithet is *immemor*.[7] According to Ariadne's lament, Theseus forgets his duty to her as *coniunx* and unjustly abandons her. Throughout the ecphrasis, Ariadne voices her disapproval of Theseus' forgetfulness and attaches a moral dimension to his lapse in memory. Nearly as often as Theseus is called *immemor*, he is called *perfidus*.[8] These two epithets, in the mind of Ariadne, are inextricably linked, as evident in lines 132-135 in the opening of her lament:

> *Sicine me patriis avectam,* ***perfide****, ab aris,*
> ***Perfide****, deserto* ***liquisti*** *in litore, Theseu?*
> *Sicine discedens* ***neglecto*** *numine divum,*
> ***Immemor*** *a! devota domum periuria portas?*
>
> *Is this how you leave me, traitor, on the lonely shore,*
> *Carried away from my father's altars, Theseus, you traitor?/ Is this how, withdrawing, neglecting the will of the gods,/ O heedless one, you bring home accursed perjuries?*

These lines inform the reader that for Ariadne, Theseus' forgetfulness and his treachery are the same thing. He is not excused for forgetting about her, since he had deceitful intentions from their first meeting. If we take from Deborah Stein's article the interpretation that Catullus, to some degree, self-identifies with Ariadne, it becomes evident that the poet himself intertwines forgetfulness and deceit, making a misguided memory into a sign of compromised morality.[9] To

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[7] See line 58 "*immemor at iuvenis fugiens*," line 123 "*immemori discedens pectore coniunx*," line 135 "(*Theseu*)…*immemor*," line 248 "*mente immemori*."

[8] See lines 132, 133, 174.

[9] See Deborah Stein, "The Heart of the Poet at the Heart of His Poem: The Manner and Purpose of Catullus' Identification with Ariadne in Poem 64," *Akroterion* vol. 63, 2018: 185-213. Stein's article talks about Catullus' commonalities with Ariadne in suffering abandonment

misrepresent or abandon the reality of the past, in other words, is commit an act of dishonesty. This interpretation is highly provocative, as the poet, through Ariadne, is himself guilty of misremembering. Theseus is condemned for forgetting his position as *coniunx*, but what Ariadne and Catullus forget is that Theseus was never a *coniunx* in the first place, nor did he promise (at least in *Carmen* 64) that he ever would be. That title belongs to Bacchus, who will not enter the poem until line 251. Whenever Theseus is called a *coniunx*, then, it is a sign of Ariadne's and Catullus' own forgetfulness. Thus, not only does Catullus use Theseus' forgetfulness to point to dysfunction within the potential *domus* of Theseus and Ariadne, but he also uses it to directly link ideas of forgetfulness and damaged morality. This association, as articulated by Ariadne, remains present throughout the rest of the poem, reminding the reader that when Catullus is *immemor*, he is talking about something that is *perfidus*.

In addition to narrative forgetfulness, Catullus makes substantial use of the concept of familial liminality to express dysfunction in the *domus*. This practice is most clearly evident in the ecphrasis and Catullus' discussion of Ariadne and Theseus. Both Ariadne and Theseus, at the end of their interactions, are left homeless – Ariadne stuck between two potential *domus* units and Theseus totally isolated, having rejected any potential *domus*. Although it is easy to read Ariadne merely as a typical embodiment of the abandoned woman trope, Catullus makes it clear to the reader that Ariadne

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by Lesbia, and the redefinition of traditional Roman values that comes as a result of Catullus' association of Ariadne with both himself and with a heroic figure.

has not only been abandoned by another, but that she has done her own abandoning as well. In lines 117-119, he writes,

> *Sed quid ego a primo digressus carmine plura*
> *Commemorem, ut* ***linquens genitoris filia*** *vultum,*
> *Ut* ***consanguiniae*** *complexum, ut denique* ***matris****,*
> *Quae misera in* ***gnata deperdita*** *laetabatur.*
>
> But why, further departed from my original song,
> Should I remember how the daughter, leaving father's sight,
> The embrace of her sister, and finally her mother,
> Who, pitiful one, was rejoicing for her lost daughter*?*

This departure is Ariadne's "Theseus" moment. Before Ariadne ever laments being abandoned by Theseus, Catullus ensures that the reader knows how Ariadne first abandoned her own *domus* prematurely. First her father, then her sister, then her mother is abandoned, until Ariadne has totally rejected the *domus* to which she belongs. And errantly so – she does not yet have a marriage proposal to accept or a new *domus* to join, so when Theseus rejects her, there is no other *domus* to which she can go. She is truly *deperdita*. There is no going back once Ariadne has left, as she later realizes in 180-181, during her lament:

> *An patris auxilium sperem? Quemne* ***ipsa reliqui***
> *Respersum iuvenem* ***fraterna caede*** *secuta?*
>
> Or can I hope for my father's aid? Whom I myself abandoned,
> Having followed a boy sprinkled with my brother's blood?

Here, Ariadne realizes her mistake in abandoning her family, to whom she now cannot return. Not only is she isolated from the *domus* because she abandoned it, but also because she assisted Theseus in the killing of her brother, the Minotaur[10] (*fraterna*

[10] The Minotaur thread is important for highlighting both immoral action (in the circumstances surrounding his birth and his death) and familial dysfunction (in Ariadne's confusion over his place in the *domus*). Near the beginning of the poem, Catullus refers to the Minotaur as *monstrum* (101). However, Ariadne identifies him as

caede), further solidifying the breakdown of her original *domus*. She acknowledges the dysfunction in both her past *domus* and her potential *domus*, and that her current "homelessness," to borrow a term from Daniels, is as much a result of her own premature and misguided abandonment of her family as it was of Theseus' abandonment of her. [11] Ariadne understands and expresses, although too late, the link between morality, expressed in duty to one's *domus*, to the integrity of the *domus* unit, a key connection that Catullus wants his reader to understand. She eventually will be married to Bacchus, an event to which Catullus hints later in the poem, and her state of familial liminality will be, in a way, resolved (although in the divine realm, where the boundaries of *domus* are far less concrete and defined). At the moment of her speech, though, Ariadne is isolated from any family unit, and never again will she participate in the human institution of *domus*.

Ariadne is not the only illustration of a figure in familial limbo, but Theseus as well, by abandoning both Ariadne and his father, Aegeus, makes himself doubly homeless, entirely lacking association with the *domus.* Catullus makes the damage done by this double rejection especially clear in the poem by giving Theseus' two victims back-to-back, mirroring lament speeches. Whereas Ariadne's speech focuses on the loss of a potential *coniunx*, Aegeus' speech focuses on the loss of a son (*gnate*).[12] Further, Catullus makes the reader fully aware that the

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germanum (150) and *fraterna* (180). Catullus sees the Minotaur as isolated from both the *domus* and the human race, while Ariadne chooses to include him.

[11] See Daniels, "The Song of the Fates." Daniels concludes her article with the statement that "to be homeless, according to Catullus, is the most pitiable state of man."

[12] See lines 215, 216, and 220 for Aegeus' uses of *gnate* in his lament.

possibility of either of Theseus' possible *domus* units to welcome him back has been extinguished – on the one hand, Ariadne marries Bacchus, so there is no longer a possibility for Theseus to marry her, and Aegeus commits suicide, so Theseus can never return to his father. In both cases, Theseus' rejection is final. It is also *perfidus* and *immemor* - his rejection of Ariadne required deceit, and suicide of his father came about from Theseus' failure to remember Aegeus' instructions.[13] Thus, both Ariadne and Theseus become homeless, with no *domus* available to them, either because of their own rejection or by the rejection of others. It is not by chance that these figures become homeless – rather, the rendering of Ariadne and Theseus as homeless is construed as the result of acts of impropriety or immorality. In Ariadne's case, it is the fact that she left her original home before the right time, and in the case of Theseus, focalized through Ariadne's perspective, his isolation from the *domus* comes from a broken promise - an act of *perfidia*. Catullus repeatedly emphasizes this reality throughout the ecphrasis, not making explicit judgments from his own voice about the morality of his characters but focalizing the moralizing judgements through other characters and making indirect implications about their moral deficiency, effectively compelling the reader to confront and ponder the moral undertones of the narrative.

Finally, Catullus repeatedly uses irony to underscore the compromised nature of the *domus* in the poem. The irony is most evident in the Song of the *Parcae* – an epithalamium that

[13] Catullus does not explicitly point to this incident of Theseus forgetting to post white flags upon his return to Aegeus, but this version of the myth would be assumed as common enough for the reader to have in mind.

is meant to commemorate an ideal union between divine and mortal. However, given the actual story of Thetis and Peleus that the reader knows and just has been invited to recall in the beginning of the poem, the Song of the *Parcae* is highly ironic in its celebration of the perfect marriage. Consider, for instance, lines 328-331 of the Song of the *Parcae*:

> *Adveniet tibi iam portans **optata maritis***
> *Hesperus, adveniet **fausto** cum **sidere coniunx,***
> *Quae tibi flexanimo mentem **perfundat amore**,*
> *Languidulos paret tecum **coniungere somnos**,*
> *Levia **substernens** robusto bracchia collo.*
>
> He will come to you even now, bringing the desires of husbands,/ Hesperus, a mate will come with an auspicious star/ Who will flood your mind with head-swaying love, Prepared to join with you in listless slumbers,/Spreading her gentle arms below your hardy neck.

Here, the *Parcae* describe Thetis as desired by others (*optata*) and coming as a wife (*coniunx*) to Peleus under joyful circumstances (*fausto … sidere*), desiring him and eager to be a wife to him (*perfundat amore … coniungere somnos…substernens*). However, given what the reader remembers from the beginning of the poem about the reluctance of Thetis, this passage is highly ironic and undermines the supposed happiness of the marriage. Thetis was given to Peleus unwillingly and out of necessity, not out of their mutual desire for one another. This irony alerts the reader that something is amiss in the *domus* of Thetis and Peleus and in the way the *Parcae* portray it. Immediately following this, in 334-336, the *Parcae* become even more explicit in their ironized ideal union of Thetis and Peleus, singing:

> ***Nulla domus** tales umquam contexit **amores**,*
> ***Nullus amor** tali coniunxit **foedere amantes**,*
> *Qualis adest Thetidi, qualis concordia Peleo.*

No house ever protected such great loves,
No love ever joined lovers with such a bond,
As the kind of harmony that Thetis and Peleus have.

This part of the *Parcae's* song is riddled with idealized imagery of the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. The abundance of various forms of *amor* gives the impression that the husband and wife are filled with passion for one another, while the mention of the *domus* and of *foedere* suggests lasting stability for the two lovers. But again, just as the reader knows that Thetis was not married to Peleus under ideal circumstances, there is a similar awareness that the *domus* of Thetis and Peleus was not as full of *amor* as the *Parcae* make it out to be. This prior knowledge of the reality of the Thetis and Peleus story further reinforces an impression of irony in the reader and undermines the claims made by the *Parcae* about their ideal union. Further, the openings of lines 334 and 335 (*nulla domus…nullus amor*) underscore the real lack of familiar stability and love that permeated the marriage of Peleus and Thetis.

By the end of the Song of the *Parcae*, the reader is left to conclude that Catullus can't actually mean to present an unironically idealized wedding in his poem. Up to this point, the poem has been too riddled with misremembered reality, characters left homeless, and striking irony to give the impression that Catullus is sincere in his idealization of Thetis and Peleus. All of its images of the *domus* are either flawed, broken, or intentionally misrepresented to bring to mind an alternate version of a *domus* that is flawed. If that is not enough to give the reader the impression that *Carmen* 64 possesses some moralizing undertones, the cap (lines 397-408) of *Carmen* 64 solidifies it with a catalogue of sins containing explicit descriptions of brutally violent moral deficiency:

Sed postquam tellus scelere est imbuta nefando
Iustitiamque omnes cupida de mente fugarunt,
Perfudere manus ***fraterno*** *sanguine* ***fratres****,*
Destitit extinctos ***gnatus*** *lugere* ***parentes****,*
Optavit ***genitor*** *primaevi funera* ***nati****,*
Liber ut ***innuptae*** *poteretur flore* ***novercae****,*
Ignaro ***mater*** *substernens se impia* ***nato***
Impia non verita est divos scelerare penates.
Omnia fanda nefanda malo permixta furore
Iustificam nobis mentem avertere deorum.
Quare nec talis dignantur visere coetus,
Nec se contingi patiuntur lumine claro.

But after Earth was soaked in unspeakable sin
And everyone routed justice from their greedy minds,
Brothers coated their hands in the blood of their brothers,
A son ceased to grieve the deaths of his parents,
The father hoped for the funeral of his firstborn, so that
He, unimpeded, could have the bloom of a new marriage,
A mother, underlaying her wicked self to a son unaware,
She, wicked one, was not afraid to defile the holy Penates.
Everything proper with wicked was mingled by evil frenzy
Turned the just mind of the gods away from us.
This is why they neither deign to visit such unions
Nor allow themselves to be reached by gleaming light.

The images of immorality in Catullus' cap are all familial in nature – that is, they show the breakdown of the *domus* in high relief. The images of brothers killing brothers, parents refusing to mourn their children, fathers hoping their sons will die, and mothers wanting to sleep with their sons all show what happens when a lack of morality leads to dysfunction within the *domus*. In the closing lines of *Carmen* 64, familial breakdown presents itself as the main theme of Catullus' poem, shown throughout the poem in the ecphrasis of Ariadne and Theseus and the Song of the *Parcae* about the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, and ultimately culminating in the poem's cap. Catullus' cap is so full of impious images (*omnia fanda nefanda …*) and blatant immorality that the reader is stopped in his tracks, stunned by the weight of the immorality and destruction occurring at the end of the poem. From there, he must look back on the rest of

the poem and see the ways Catullus has been pointing to the cap all along. Through his misremembering, portrayals of homelessness, and use of irony, Catullus shows a deeply flawed *domus* that is destroyed by dysfunctional relationships. These relationships, in turn, are damaged by a rejection of moral standards. While it is plausible, then, to argue that *Carmen* 64 is not a large-scale criticism of the Heroic Age or of Catullus' own time, it is not reasonable to say that the poem is entirely free of moral undertones. It is clear that Catullus does, in fact, confront the morality of his characters, bringing their deficiency to light through the broken-down relationships that develop throughout the poem. Thus, Catullus' *Carmen* 64 is not an expression of artistic escapism, but rather of anti-escapism: by forcing the reader to look immorality and dysfunction in the face time and time again, Catullus traps his reader, forbidding him to escape to a poetic utopia and forcing him to come to terms with reality.

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